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UNITARIAN BELIEF

IX. DIVINE PROVIDENCE AND HUMAN FREEDOM

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SERMONS

OF

JAMES FREEMAN CLARKE.

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GEORGE H. ELLIS,
141 Franklin St., Boston, Mass.

Divine Providence and Human Freedom.

"Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure."—PHIL. ii. 12, 13.

The subject of my discourse is "The Unitarian Belief concerning the Providence of God and the Freedom of Man."

When I speak of the Unitarian belief on this subject, I am obliged to admit that very few of our writers have expressed any clear opinion concerning the relation between God's government of the world and man's activity therein. Priestley and his followers in England were Necessarians (or, as we now say, Determinists), and virtually denied the freedom of the human will. Channing and his followers in this country have fully believed in human freedom, and have always absolutely rejected Priestley's two metaphysical doctrines of materialism and necessity. Unitarians have generally joined to a belief in human freedom a faith in an overruling Providence, but have made few attempts to reconcile these antagonist truths by logic or philosophy. They find both of these great facts asserted by reason and religion, by observation, reflection, and experience. They therefore accept both, though unable logically to harmonize them. They believe that God foresees all events, for else he could not direct all events. They believe that he maintains universal order, and governs by unchanging law; for this is the postulate

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of reason. On the other hand, every man has a conviction, fixed, necessary, ineradicable, that he has a power of choice, a power of self-direction, ability to select between this and that, to determine to do this, or not to do it, at every moment. He is not the slave of motives: he is, to a large extent, their master. If there is such a thing as knowledge, we *know* this; and all the logic in the world cannot convince us of the contrary.

The New Testament, in the same way, everywhere assumes and declares both of these facts,—that God governs, and directs all things, and that man is free to obey or to disobey his laws. Belief in a supreme and ever-present Providence is required as the very foundation of the religious life. It is needed as comfort in sorrow, support in trial, and to give us strength to obey. The New Testament fully meets this want. It tells us that God is "above all, and through all, and in us all"; that not a sparrow can fall to the ground "without the Father"; that the hairs of our heads "are numbered"; that "all events from the foundation of the world" are "known unto God." But still the New Testament everywhere treats man as a free agent; appeals to him as one capable of obeying the truth or refusing to obey it. If it speaks of men as chosen to life and good, it tells them to "give diligence to make their calling and election sure." It sometimes recognizes in a single sentence both the fact of Divine Providence and of human freedom. Peter says to the Jews, "Jesus, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain." And Paul exhorts the disciples thus: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in

I think, therefore, that Unitarians would usually say that all providence is special, and all general; that all events which come to us come by law, and also that all are intended and adapted to our best good. These laws work not only for the good of society, but also for that of individuals. They are like the laws of mathematics, which operate in the same way whether applied to a nation's finances or a school-boy's pocket money, whether to determine the course of a planet or the fall of a withered leaf.

Unitarians believe so fully in human freedom and human responsibility that they accept no view of divine foreknowledge or divine decrees which limits either. Before all things, they believe that man may freely choose or refuse the good and the evil. We do not imagine that there is such a thing as irresistible grace. There is no destiny which a man may not accept or reject. In our highest and best hours God works with us and in us, and we also may work freely with him. We are fellow-workers with God when we do right. The more we receive of divine influence, the more we feel ourselves acting without constraint and freely. The law of the spirit of life, the perfect law of liberty, enables us to work out our own salvation, because God works in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure.

Still, the intellectual difficulty comes back continually, and often disturbs us. If God does not foresee all events, how can he be omnipotent? And if he does foresee all

be this: There cannot be to the Infinite Being such a life in the present moment as there is to us. God cannot remember as we do what happened to him in past ages, nor look forward as we do to what will happen hereafter. He lives in eternity, not in time. Therefore, all events stand before him as in an eternal present. What to us is future is to him now and here. Strictly speaking, therefore, he does not foresee: he sees. If I see a man in the act of striking another, I know certainly that he is doing it; but my knowledge does not prevent him from acting with perfect freedom. Thus God sees as happening now all the actions of men, past, present, and future. But because he sees them being done,—this does not make them less free.

This is no explanation in the sense of making a thing plain to the understanding; but it is an explanation in this sense, that it shows that a thing must be, though we do not understand how it can be. It is only saying that God's ways are not as our ways, nor his thoughts as our thoughts. We see that God cannot be carried on in a current of time, as we are; that his eternal being cannot be measured by years, as ours is; that he cannot remember and foresee, as we do. He can no more be limited to one point of time than to one point of space. He is in all time and in all space. And, if this is so, then to speak of his foreknowledge and predestination is to say that he knows all things and governs all things.

And what is the freedom of man? Is it freedom to

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do whatever he will? Certainly not. Man is limited by his organization, limited by his circumstances. He has certain fixed qualities of mind and body. He is what he has been made to be; he cannot by any act or will make himself different. A Hottentot cannot be a New Zealander; one born with a low organization cannot be a Fénelon or a Channing. The very thoughts which flow through our mind in a steady current are not our creation: they come according to some established laws of association, imagination, memory. The motives which actuate our conduct, hope and fear, desire and aversion, come up from some dark background in our being. Every one has a special character of his own, which has come to him by birth and education. He cannot make a new character when he chooses. If he could, he would have no fixed character at all.

Seeing all this limitation to human freedom, many persons regard man as a machine. They consider him the slave of organization and circumstances, therefore not responsible for what he does or omits to do. The Calvinist says: "Man can do nothing. God does everything." The materialist says: "Man can do nothing. The phosphorus and carbon in his brain do everything." The Necessarian says: "Man can do nothing. His conduct is always determined by the strongest motive."

But this reasoning is one-sided, contrary to what men know in their own consciousness to be true. Every one who is not insane is able to watch, control, restrain, direct, the course of his thoughts. We hold certain thoughts in our mental grasp, and keep them till they become luminous and clear. We form a purpose, we select an aim, we choose between this and that, at every moment.

The child is the creature of impulse, habit, imitation, circumstances. As he grows up, he learns to direct his course. He no longer drifts: he steers. He accepts certain convictions as true and right, and holds by them. He chooses certain work to do, and adheres to it. He admits one class of ideas in his mind, and shuts out another. Thus he acquires the power of self-direction; thus he is able to rise above the influence of circumstances; he controls his destiny instead of being controlled by it, and so becomes more and more free day by day.

For, observe this, that there are degrees in human freedom. Freedom in its lowest form is only caprice or wilfulness. Every man can choose at any moment between this and that thought, this and that word, this and that action. He can lean one way or another. He can restrain the course of his ideas or let them flow. But if he has no law by which to choose, no aim to follow, no truth to guide him, then his freedom is nothing but caprice. He does not really direct his course, but drifts before the chance currents of whim and fancy which may take possession of him. He has freedom of choice, but it accomplishes nothing; it is a barren freedom.

But when this free choice is directed by law, when it follows the divine light of truth, then the soul of man becomes really free. "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free," said the Master. We become really free only as we become obedient to eternal law. Then we unfold our powers easily and naturally. Then all outward influences help us and do not hinder us. Then we go onward and upward by a happy progress to higher truth, to larger good.

All the outward progress man has made, all the inven-

tions and discoveries which have given him such a dominion over the world, have been accomplished by studying the laws of the material universe, and giving them an absolute obedience. He has chained fire to his chariot, he has sent the lightning on his errands, by a strict and careful observance of law. So he becomes outwardly free from the weight of his earthly conditions. And he becomes inwardly free in the same way, and in no other, by knowing the laws of justice, truth, purity, generosity, and obeying them.

When Jesus uttered the sermon on the mount, he was not commanding duties, but stating eternal laws. "The pure in heart shall see God" is an everlasting law of the moral world. "The merciful shall obtain mercy," "He who forgives shall be forgiven," "He who humbles himself shall be exalted," "It is more blessed to give than to receive,"— these are not arbitrary commands offered by the divine will, but statements of facts fixed in the eternal nature of things.

To know the truth and to obey it makes us free. To know the truths of the physical and material world, and to act in accordance with them, makes us free in the domain of the body and the senses. To know the laws of intelligence and to obey them makes the intellect free to discover the truth. To know the moral laws and obey them frees us from the power of moral evil. To know the laws of the spiritual world, and to conform ourselves to them, gives to us the glorious liberty of the sons of God.

The freedom of man, at first hardly more than caprice, may rise into the freedom of obedience, and thus become perfect. It begins as a feeble instinct, and becomes a

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majestic power. It ascends out of the chance prattle of the child into the sublime intelligence of the prophet and sage. It is developed from the inconsistent and changeable purposes of the savage into the heroic devotion of the patriots, heroes, reformers, who may change the whole tendency of their age. As man allies himself with immortal truth and infinite good, his powers expand till he possesses the world. It is by this law that all things work together for good to them that love God. In a moment of glowing insight, Paul perceived the working of this law, and said, "All things are yours, whether Paul, Apollos, or Peter, whether life or death, things present or things to come,— all are yours." In a like moment of inspired vision, Wordsworth addressed the patriot of Hayti, crushed under the iron heel of Napoleon : —

> "Live and take comfort. Thou hast left behind
> Powers that will work for thee,— air, earth, and skies;
> There's not a breathing of the common mind
> That will forget thee; thou hast great allies!
> Thy friends are exultations, agonies,
> And love, and man's unconquerable mind."

Jesus, looking forward to the cross, said, "I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto me." That supreme act of obedience put into his hand supreme power.

As we place ourselves in harmony with the will of God, he works in us both to will and to do. He strengthens our will and makes us able to execute. The soul always open to God in prayer receives unlimited supplies of power. Being in accordance with the nature of things, in the line of all advance, it is equally served by what is called evil or what we think good, by pain and joy, by honor and dishonor, by evil report and good report. All

things serve and help him who is in harmony with the infinite order of the universe.

> "O mighty love! man is one world, and hath
> Another to attend him."

Thus, though the relation of divine and human will cannot be reconciled by any intellectual solvent, they are made one practically in every honest life. Calvin taught that God has predestined all men from before the foundation of the world to eternal life or to eternal damnation. But the only destiny taught in the New Testament is a destiny to some service, some opportunity, some use, some good, in the present world. The Mohammedans say that each man's destiny is written in his forehead. It is written behind the forehead, in his brain. When God by his providence causes us to be born with a certain organic structure, gives us a specific education by place, time, and circumstances, he provides for each of us a distinct calling and election. He elects us not to a place in the other world, but to a work in this world. Each of us has something to do for him. Our business is to find out what that work is and to do it. Our power and our freedom consist not in doing anything and everything, but that very something for which we are made. We are free to accept or to reject our destiny, but not free to create another. Each has his place in the body, as a foot, a hand, an eye, a tongue; and one cannot say to the other, "I have no need of thee," for each needs all the rest, and all the rest need him. Our social state becomes disordered by vain ambitions. When men who are made to be good farmers crowd into the city to enter trade, when men who might be excellent mechanics become poor

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lawyers, when men struggle for political offices for which they have no capacity, when those who can write good prose think they must compose verses,— they are not making their calling and election sure. Instead of becoming more free, they lose their freedom : their faculties work badly in this stiff harness, their powers are hampered. Only when we move in the right path, the way of providence, do our faculties unfold, as easily as the buds are now opening in the warm airs of spring.

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P.O. Mission, The Church of the Disciples,

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